Dropping out of high school: The role of parent and teacher self-determination support, reciprocal friendships and academic motivation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether parent and teacher support for basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence and relatedness), students' reciprocal friendships, and academic motivation assessed in Grade 10 ($N = 624$) could predict dropping out of high school two years later in Grade 12. Results revealed that reciprocal friendships contributed to the prediction of dropping out of high school, above and beyond the effects of academic motivation, or parent and teacher support for basic psychological needs. Although parent support for basic psychological needs appeared to be the most significant predictor of academic motivation and dropping out of high school, results suggested that reciprocal friendships represented an important factor that affect both motivation and persistence. Most specifically, our findings demonstrated that a lack of reciprocal friendships had detrimental effects on these aforementioned processes, whereas having reciprocal friendships lead to favorable outcomes.

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1. Introduction

It is well documented that one of the most critical issues facing the educational system in North America is the problem of students who leave school before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Dropping out of high school is an important problem that affects thousands of students each year. Statistics Canada's most recent report on the issue revealed that one out of 12 (8.5%) Canadian adults, aged 20 through 24 years, had not completed a high school diploma nor were they attending school in 2009–2010 (Center for Education Statistics, Statistics Canada, 2010). Similarly, in the United States, the status dropout rate for those aged 16 through 24 years was estimated at 7% in 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Compared with high school graduates, those who do not complete high school have greater chances of unemployment, which can lead to welfare dependency; higher levels of depression and alienation, which can result in physical and mental health problems; and an increased frequency of delinquency, which can lead to criminal activity and incarceration (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). Clearly, the ramifications related to dropping out of high school are far-reaching and significant, at both the individual and social levels.

The high prevalence of dropping out of high school, as well as its economic and personal costs, has prompted the development of a considerable body of research exploring prevention strategies for dropping out of high school (Chia, Keng, & Ryan, 2015). However, targeted prevention strategies are dependent on the identification of factors that predict dropping out of high school. As a result, the early identification of students who are likely to drop out of high school and monitoring of these students throughout their education represent critical factors.

In response to Canadian legislation that permits dropping out of school at the age of 16, some studies have focused on predicting such behavior starting when students are in grade nine (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; French & Conrad, 2001; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). This period of high school is one of significant transition, in which students, for the first time in their academic careers, are able to form intentions of dropping out upon which they can legally act. Vallerand et al. (1997) postulated that it is during this influential stage that students who have developed intentions of dropping out will eventually do so, while the others will go on to acquire their diplomas.

Beyond establishing when prevention programs should be initiated in order to maximize their effectiveness, identifying factors that predict dropping out of high school is another important prerequisite for its prevention. Some studies suggest that factors like students' academic performance (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000), history of absenteeism, and general disengagement (Archambault, Janosz,

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Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008) from school life represent proximal factors that are closely associated to dropping out of high school. However, other empirical evidence suggests that support from parents and teachers (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006), peers acceptance (Chen, Hughes, Liew, & Kwok, 2010; Kindermann, 2007; Kiuru, Aunola, Vuori, & Nurmi, 2007), and academic motivation (Fortier, Vallerand, & Guay, 1995; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992; Vallerand et al., 1997) are important and critical factors that could also predict dropping out of high school. Although factors like academic performance, absenteeism, and disengagement may represent reliable factors to identify students at risk of dropping out of school, we believe that factors such as support for students' basic psychological needs (i.e. autonomy, competence and relatedness; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) from parents and teachers, reciprocal friendships with class-mates, and academic motivation are critical because they may not only predict dropping out, but that could also be the reasons why students are absent, have lower grades, and are disengaged. Fur-thermore, these factors may serve as targeted intervention strategies that are more easily employed.

To our knowledge, no study has examined simultaneously how parent and teacher support for basic psychological needs (i.e. au-tonomy, competence and relatedness), reciprocal friendships, and academic motivation predict dropping out of high school. Drawing from past literatures on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2009) and the influence of friendships on school engagement (Cillessen & Marks, 2011; Goulet, Cantin, Archambault, & Vitaro, 2015; Kindermann, 2007; Mayeux, Houser, & Dyches, 2011; Parker & Asher, 1993; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998), in this article, we propose to examine how these two areas of research can be merged to provide a clearer portrait of dropping out of high school.

1.1. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) is a conceptual framework that proposes different types of motiva-tion. It also stresses the importance of having three basic psychological needs (i.e. autonomy, competence and relatedness) satisfied in order to achieve optimal personal development and func-tioning. SDT portrays motivation as a multidimensional construct that suggests that different types of motivation are associated with different reasons underlying behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). It is theorized that the type of motivation is more important than the total amount of motivation in predicting outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). SDT suggests that motivation varies along a continuum of self-determination. When motivation is more self-determined, be-havior is carried out with a full sense of autonomy and choice. In contrast, when motivation is less self-determined, behavior is carried out under external constraints in order to attain specific out-comes (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Several studies have supported the validity of this continuum in education and a variety of other life domains (see Vallerand, 1997, for a review of these studies).

Intrinsic motivation represents the highest level of self-determination. When individuals are intrinsically motivated, they engage in behavior for the pleasure and satisfaction that they in-herently experience with participation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). For example, a student who is intrinsically motivated will go to school for the enjoyment of learning new things. Conversely, when people are extrinsically motivated they perform an activity as a means to some other end (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Deci and Ryan pro-posed different forms of extrinsic regulatory styles that represent different levels of self-determination. From lowest to highest self-determination, the regulatory styles are: external regulation, introjected regulation, and identified regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985,

2000). Behavior that is *externally regulated* is controlled by an outside source. For example, students who go to school because their parents or the law force them to, demonstrate behavior that is externally regulated. *Introjected regulation* occurs when the formerly exter-nal source of motivation is partially internalized, but has not yet been fully accepted by the individual. Students demonstrate this type of regulation when they go to school to avoid the guilt associated with dropping out. *Identified regulation*, a higher form of self-determined extrinsic motivation, occurs when an activity has been judged to have personal value and importance. Students who go to school because they want to pursue a career that requires an ed-ucation demonstrate identified regulation.

Amotivation occurs when participation is perceived as not having any impact on the desired result. This regulatory style is consis-tent with the concept of learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), and is displayed when students do not know why they are going to school. Amotivated students see no point in their attendance, or they are not able to foresee the consequences of their behavior. They have a pervasive sense that their behaviors are caused by external forces beyond their control. When students are amotivated, they experience feelings of incompetence and lack of control (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These amotivated students once had good reasons for going to school, but now wonder whether they should continue with their education.

1.1.1. Basic psychological needs

SDT posits that individuals take an active role in their own lives and in the fulfillment of three innate psychological needs: the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Although human de-velopment is naturally inclined toward more autonomy, behaviors must be nurtured by experiences of autonomy, competence, and re-latedness. The concept of needs as proposed in SDT refers to the innate psychological drives that must be fulfilled in order to promote growth, integrity, and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The need for *autonomy* refers to the experience of psychological freedom and volition; to being the source of one's own behavior (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985). The need for *competence* refers to the ex-perience of effectance and a sense of confidence in one's interaction with the physical and social environment (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Finally, the need for *relatedness* refers to the experience of reciprocal care and feeling connected to others; to having a sense of belongingness with others and with one's community (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

People grow and flourish in environments that facilitate the sat-isfaction of the three basic psychological needs. Environment that satisfy these needs favor internalization and healthy psychologi-cal functioning, whereas thwarting of these needs leads to negative consequences. More specifically, autonomy supportive (as oppose to controlling) contexts support autonomy, well-structured (as opposed to unorganized and chaotic) contexts favor competence, and caring and responsive (as opposed to distant and neglectful) contexts facilitate relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). In sum, when basic psychological needs are less satisfied (or when they are thwarted), behaviors are more likely to be carried out for non-self-determined reasons (i.e. con-trolled regulation), whereas when the needs are satisfied, behaviors will be carried out for self-determined reasons (i.e. autonomous reg-ulation). Behaviors that are engaged in autonomously are associated with better functioning and persistence, while controlled behav-iors often lead to self-regulation problems and failures. According to SDT, motivation plays a mediating role amid the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and the behavior or outcome that will result from it (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002). Thus, from an applied per-spective, students who are provided with an environment that foster the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs should the-oretically increase their academic motivation. In turn, this should lead to academic persistence over time.